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Geographies of the passenger

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Geographies of the passenger

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Across the social sciences, it is clear that researchers have been animated by issues of being on the move in all kinds of different ways, both methodologically and theoretically (Adey 2009; Cresswell 2006; Urry 2000). However, rather than celebrating the diversity of approaches that are being pursued, recent commentaries, particularly within the discipline of geography, have revealed a nagging unease about the extent to which researchers, who are interested in ostensibly similar issues of movement, are simply not talking to one another. The problem, then, may not be geographic. As outlined within these commentaries, this diversity is paired down to two broad trajectories through which movement is conceptualised. One of these, 'transport geography' is often caricatured (admittedly from outside the pages of this journal) as being concerned with utilitarian aspects of movement, whilst the other, 'mobilities research', is depicted as being concerned with the aesthetics, experiences and meanings bound up with movement. As Shaw and Hesse (2010) have suggested, such polarised categorisations are unhelpful not least because they mask significant diversity across approaches that might be better conceptualized as being positioned on a continuum. Of course, the long history of 'transport geography' and short story of 'mobilities research' tell of distinct origins, ambitions and engagements. Consequently although there are many overlaps, they are thus far substantially unexplored, and the two need to learn about one another in order to recognise their respective ambitions, approaches and concepts.

With mobilities research no longer being a 'turn' and solidifying into an interdisciplinary field (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006) there has come a time to increase the dialogue between transport geographers and mobilities researchers (Cresswell, 2011; Shaw and Hesse, 2010; Shaw and Sidaway, 2010). Even while mobilities research was still in a more liquid form there had been disagreement and fermentations between these two approaches bubbling through conference papers and journal articles. If there were going to be reactions, either productive or destructive these have tended to be conspicuous through their *absence*; with researchers from different perspectives continuing to harvest materials and deliver their findings without acknowledgement of other modes of production. Perhaps this comes as a surprise, given the continental networks which are successfully emerging between mobilities research within the social sciences, from Cosmobilities, the Pan-American Mobilities Network and the growth of interdisciplinary mobilities research centres such as Cemore (Lancaster), Ifmo and TU Munich, Mobility Research (Denmark) and the Mobilities Research and Policy Centre (Philadelphia). The problem, therefore, may not be geographic. One could certainly diagnose this relative absence of cross-fertilisation as being due to incommensurable epistemologies, incompatible logics and lexicons. Or one could implicate differing imperatives and expectations about the descriptions, explanations and understandings that research can or should generate. But underneath this quiet evasion which has kept conflicts at bay, the possibilities for generosity are also lost. The absence of regular encounter has meant that claims to novelty often simply mask a lack of acknowledgement (Cresswell, 2010).

The good ship 'dialogue' comes freighted with all kinds of assumptions as to its value and what it has the capacity to deliver. Dialogue might be 'a way of being-in-relationship to another, a specific form of communication, a quality of communication, a certain kind of interpersonal relationship, an experience, or something else' (Pearce, 2002, viii). We should not make the assumption that dialogue cannot be anything but a positive thing. It can easily end up deepening the water between the two through dismissal, debunking or self-serving strategic positioning. To try and create positive dialogue, is about being susceptible to other approaches and therefore becomes a more vulnerable or humbling experience. It is not just about annunciation, or the presentation of ideas side-by-side. It is also about listening and being receptive. To be productive, dialogue involves a spirit of generosity. A willingness to be transformed, seduced and infected by approaches that might be initially baffling, confusing and uncomfortable.

How might this dialogue work in practice? For Shaw and Hesse, a key way of gathering together and capitalising on the exciting diversity of approaches is to foster 'mutually beneficial dialogue around shared themes' (2010, 310). Cresswell (2011) has already pointed out how research on the significance of 'travel time' might serve as key bridge between approaches in transport geography and mobilities research. Other points of productive crossover might emerge through the material worlds that have been explored in Science and Technology Studies where no specific subject or object gets prioritised in analysis. Instead it is the contingent and dynamic relations between things that are of interest and that have real effects. Take John Law's (2003) study of the 1999 Ladbroke Grove rail crash in the UK where two trains collided head-on killing 31 passengers. In his analysis, things that might often be treated as disparate areas of enquiry are brought together and viewed as a system in order to understand what went wrong. This is something that, as Law deftly demonstrates, is not straightforward. Other instances of mobility failure can be found in the recent special issue of *Mobilities* regarding the volcanic Ash-Cloud disruption (Büscher and Birtchnell 2011). Demonstrating the complex, paired and interdependent systems and subsystems of a transportation network, consisting of airline routes, engine ash-density tolerances, flight reservation systems and the geopolitical organisation of airspace. These events reveal an uncertain and contingent series of relations between disparate yet interconnected parts. What is clear is that analysis needs to account for phenomena that would be familiar to both transport geography (in Ladbroke Grove: histories of rail privatisation; organisational fragmentation; shifting institutional governance regimes; developments in rail safety technologies; profit-safety relations) and mobilities research (modes of non-reflective calculation and judgement; affective atmospheres of morale and public confidence; everyday practices of management and control). Such is their mutual imbrication – so tied up in one another as Law shows – in order to understand an event like a rail crash or disruption to air-travel, it makes little sense to scrutinise any of these components in isolation.

For us, the figure of 'the passenger' presents another bridge across these disciplinary borderlands where theories and methods can cross and re-cross from one to the other in the traffic of communication. Indeed it was just this kind of 'bridging' motivation which culminated in our organisation of a series of four diverse sessions on the *Geographies of the Passenger* at the RGS-IBG in Manchester 2009. Bringing together a range of perspectives, conceptual concerns and empirical case-studies the sessions were co-sponsored by the Social and Cultural Geography and the Transport Geography working groups of the RGS-IBG. The sessions were later followed by sessions within the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting in 2010 which, whilst not focused on the passenger, housed panels focused explicitly on the relationship between transport geography and mobilities research. Our starting point for the sessions was an acknowledgement of the significant body of research that has contributed to issues at the intersection of transport geography and mobilities research. And it is this background that this special issue seeks to push to the foreground of discussion and debates. In bringing together specialists from a range of different disciplinary backgrounds—transport geography, communication studies, modern history, cultural geography and mobilities research—this special issue of the *Journal of Transport Geography* seeks to open up a positive dialogue by considering the multiplicity of ways in which the figure of the passenger can be attended to.

Why should the passenger deserve this attention? Research has, firstly, illuminated some of the various intersecting virtual, corporeal and carceral mobilities that constitute contemporary spaces of flow (for example Urry, 2000; Jain and Lyons, 2008), whilst addressing particularly the experience, knowledge and relationships of passengers who are caught up within these flows, networks and systems (although see Laurier, 2005; Bissell, 2009), as well as how those experiences have been conceived, imagined, manipulated, regulated and engineered (Sheller, 2005; Thrift, 2004). In short then, there does not seem to be a shortage of work that involves the passenger. Secondly, whilst some consideration has been given to the various modes of transport the passenger may take, there

is now, in this special issue, the beginnings of an engagement that looks at how the experiences and imaginations of the passenger cut across multiple of modes of mobility in different geographical contexts. We could take, for instance, the discussion in the final panel of our RGS-IBG sessions where multiple figures or *typologies* of the passenger were discussed. These ranged from those imagined and presumed within transport planning and policy models towards those directly witnessed and experienced through ethnographic methods. To put this more succinctly, if there is one thing in common between the concerns of transport geography and mobilities research, it is a concern for the subjects and objects of our transport and mobility systems. Pushed even further, the passenger might also serve as a root metaphor that might usefully travel beyond its familiar transport context into other spheres of everyday life. The idea of the passenger invites us to consider forms of 'containerised' subjectivity that emerge from being 'cocooned' not only within tangible spaces and infrastructures, but also within sophisticated and bureaucratic systems of governance and control that many have no choice but to submit to (Bissell and Fuller, 2010).

Rather than introducing each paper in turn, we would like to trace four key themes that twist and turn through the six papers in this special issue: First, this collection seeks to attend to the sociality of the passenger experience by considering the types of relationship that cohere, condense or evaporate *between* passengers and the various socialities and forms of belonging that might emerge and disappear (Burrell, Vannini). It considers the morals and ethics and the rights and responsibilities that come with being a passenger (Martin, Burrell). Second, this collection considers the various processes and practices in order to become a passenger and to exit from being one (Vannini) – how, in other words, is the passenger marked by transitional states of becoming a passenger from other modes of mobility? In examining the multiple tensions between activity and passivity the papers hint at the qualitative differences between passengering and its apposite counter-forms (be it piloting, driving, steering, directing etc.). It examines the rites of passage, routines, strategies and tactics associated with becoming a passenger and how they impact on the body (Jain, Martin). Third, this collection examines how some of the various objects, prostheses and affordances both help and hinder passengers' experiences of travel itself (Burrell, Jain). It looks at the complex tensions and juxtapositions that emerge between experiences of comfort and discomfort (Martin, Burrell) and in so doing, it also seeks to help us understand the affective and emotional contours of passenger travel (Budd). These involve the affective dimensions of travelling spaces that are engineered to make passengers feel and respond in particular ways, according to the management of mood, ambience and atmosphere. Fourth, this collection explores the cultural and political-economy of the passenger and its involvement within the orderings of transport infrastructure provision (Carse). The issue also considers the extent to which the passenger has been controlled through various institutions and governance regimes, for instance in how the passenger is accounted for (Carse) together with the role of passenger testimony and historical renderings (Budd).

In bringing together a diverse set of papers which consider 'the passenger' as a political-economic-social-methodological-cultural problem and opportunity, we hope that this special issue goes some way to transcending subdisciplinary allegiances by creating new opportunities for connection and inspiration.

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